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Voting is protest, too

The outpouring of civil disobedience and protest — both non-violent and otherwise — seen on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, this month has reverberated around the world. The Aug. 9 shooting of unarmed African-American teenager Michael Brown by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson has unleashed a tidal wave of pent-up pain and anger from a community that feels systematically mistreated and unheard.

The demographics give a snapshot of the disparity. At the time of the 2010 census, just over two-thirds (67 percent) of the population was African-American. Yet, today, “majority-black Ferguson has a virtually all-white power structure: a white mayor; a school board with six white members and one Hispanic, which recently suspended a highly regarded young black superintendent who then resigned; a City Council with just one black member; and a 6 percent black police force,” reported Jeff Smith in The New York Times on Aug. 17.

Despite this imbalance, voter turnout during the last municipal election in Ferguson was a dismal 12 percent. When Rev. Al Sharpton called Ferguson’s voter participation rate “an insult to your children,” on Aug. 17 at Greater Grace Church, it rang true.

Here in our own backyard, we're not doing much better. During the May 6 primary election, Howard County saw only 9.45 percent of registered voters cast their ballots, according to the Howard County Clerk's Office. Going back to the last presidential election, that number locally was a much higher 59 percent. What people seem to forget is local, even more than national, elections have a real-world impact on people's everyday lives. Politics happens much more often than every four years.

Peacefully exercising one's First Amendment rights, as the vast majority of the Ferguson demonstrators have, should always be encouraged and celebrated. It's part of a long, storied tradition in this country. But voting should never be removed from consideration. If you feel unheard, before you make your protest sign, ask yourself if you've registered to vote. You can create meaningful change at the polls, too.